

The Rise of Avant-garde Calligraphy in Japan

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Japan is a country of paradox and so perhaps it is not strange that in such a technically advanced society the ancient art of calligraphy is still being practised. It is a remarkably resilient art form, one which has evolved slowly over three millennia. It was during the last century however, that it perhaps faced the greatest challenge to its existence and identity. The Japanese typewriter, word processor and computer have rendered good penmanship in business all but redundant; children and housewives, the staple of the calligraphy student population, are being lured away from the art to other more useful or fashionable pursuits. Despite this, there is a core of amateur practitioners willing to commit time and money to the art. It is their patronage which keeps it alive. Artistically, calligraphers have been questioning the nature of the art of calligraphy, the need for legibility, its relationship to abstract art, and the nature of its materials. The different calligraphy schools provide different answers to the questions in a variety of styles ranging from conservative to radical. It is the most radical of the styles, the *avant-garde*, which is addressed in this essay.

Avant-garde calligraphy or *Zeneisho* can be traced back to the ideas of the Japanese calligrapher Hidai Tenrai (1872 – 1939). He is commonly referred to as the Father of Modern Calligraphy in Japan. Hidai was sensitive to both the proper study of calligraphy directly from the Chinese classics and also to the developments in modern art in the West. The question of the abstract which dominated the thought of many Western artists this century found echoes in discussions about calligraphy in Japan and were manifest in modern calligraphic work after the Second World War.

In 1880 Yang Shou-Ching, a Chinese scholar on the staff of the Embassy in Tokyo, brought hitherto unseen rubbings of scripts from the Northern Dynasties (4th Century) and early Scribe's and Seal scripts to Japan. In China at that time there was a renewed interest in these scripts as the rubbings calligraphers had been using up until then had greatly deteriorated. When calligraphers in Japan saw these rubbings they, like their Chinese counterparts, became very excited by the scope of the calligraphic line and a boom in their study followed. One of the first calligraphers to study these scripts was the bureaucrat Kusakabe Meikaku. As a *Bunjūin* (an educated intellectual) he took the study of Chinese poems and calligraphy seriously.

Hidai Tenrai was Kusakabe's pupil. It was, and still is, normal practice in Japan to study scripts from the teacher's model, *tehon*. Hidai, like Kusakabe's other pupils studied the newly imported scripts from Kusakabe's *tehon*; however, unlike the other pupils, he was keen to see the rubbings for himself and

practise from them directly. For Hidai, not only was it essential to reproduce the line accurately but it was important to interpret the line for himself. Both Kusakabe and Hidai felt the purpose of practising calligraphy was to educate the human spirit and to be an expression of the spirit. Kusakabe emphasised the educative aspect but felt that practising from the teacher's *tehon* was all that was necessary as the act of writing was what was important. Hidai, on the other hand, emphasised the expressive nature of calligraphy. He did not recommend studying anything post-Tang (9th century) without also referring to the original rubbings. (This implicitly included the work of his teacher and indeed his own).

Another reason for studying directly from the rubbings was the feeling that all calligraphy post-Tang was in a sense derivative. All the major scripts had been developed and perfected by the Tang period and the history of calligraphy since then has been described as one of interpretation. For calligraphers to grasp the spirit of the scripts and produce a sympathetic rendering it is felt necessary to concentrate on the classics themselves. They were (and remain) most conducive to a freer, more personal interpretation. Work by calligraphers post-Tang are those calligraphers' interpretations. As such, they can serve as aids to study but not as substitutes for the originals.

Accuracy of transposition and a sympathetic rendering of the original was essential for the integrity of the calligraphy, while its modernity was rendered through the line by individual self-expression. Hidai coined the term *hitsu i*, the spirit of the brush, to describe the essential in a piece of calligraphy. It was through this spirit that a piece 'worked' or not and that the calligrapher expressed him or herself. It was a dynamic notion dependent on brush stroke, on line (synonymous in calligraphy) and so therefore not necessarily on the Chinese characters. This was recognised by Hidai himself. . . He once doodled a piece to show his pupils that the *hitsu i* was present in any line and those lines could be powerful and expressive. Hidai called his 'doodlings' *jo*, or to be like something. This is usually taken to be the first recorded instance of calligraphers engaging with a purely abstract ink art.

Hidai formed a calligraphy group, the '*Shodo Geijutsu Sha*' in 1933. It continued for fifteen years and its members included Ueda Sokyu, Ozawa Gakyu, Samejima Kazan, Kuwahara Suihou, Tejima Yukei and Ishibashi Saisui. Hidai centred his tuition around the study of classical calligraphy (pre-Tang), the study of Western aesthetics and the development of a new philosophy of calligraphy based on *hitsu i*. This group represented the beginning of the modern movement in Japanese calligraphy of which the avant-garde is the most extreme.

It was not, however, just Hidai and his followers who were rethinking ways of studying and defining calligraphy. The question of the nature of calligraphy had been raised among members of the *Bunjin* class when it began breaking up at the end of the Meiji period. The *Bunjin* used calligraphy to write their Chinese poetry and for them, it was primarily a means, not an end in itself. This was also

true of the other practitioners of calligraphy; among them officials who practised the *oieryu*, formalised copy book script, and the priests, particularly the Zen monks who used it as part of their meditation practices.

The *Bunjin* were aware that calligraphy was essentially Chinese and to write properly it was necessary to be as accurate as possible. They were determined to produce faithful reproductions of scripts as objectively as possible, with no individual interpretation. Nishikawa Shundou (whose followers formed the '*Kenshin Shodo Kai*' in 1933) produced careful work which could be used for further study. Discussion of the art of calligraphy and the distinctiveness of its beauty was shelved while the calligraphers pre-occupied themselves with the techniques needed to reproduce a script faithfully. As a result the *Bunjin* found themselves in direct competition with the officials who used *oieryu*: competition over technique was fierce.

By the 1920s calligraphers had begun organising themselves into large hierarchical organisations. The leaders tended to practise a few selected scripts and expected their pupils to follow their *tehon*. It was inevitable that with the hierarchies and the development of large calligraphy exhibitions the emphasis was on technique and accurate replication. The '*Tai To Shodo In*', an organisation to promote calligraphy established in 1930, continued until 1942 and sponsored exhibitions. The work exhibited became increasingly formalised until Hidai Tenrai and Onoe Saishu established a breakaway group, the '*Dai Nippon Shodo In*' in 1937.

In 1948, calligraphy was included in the National Art Exhibition, *Nitten* (a contraction of Nippon Tenrankai), for the first time. Calligraphers from the '*Tai To Shodo In*' submitted work. *Nitten* is essentially an academic exhibition and the calligraphy exhibited was (and is) orthodox and conformist. Contributors submit work in the style of the selectors to ensure selection. Most calligraphers in Japan today belong to groups which participate in *Nitten*. The powerful '*Kenshin Shodo Kai*' controls the work of about 30% of the contributors, while the '*Kansai Nihon Sho Gei In*', although not so powerful within *Nitten* itself, counts 90% of the calligraphers of Western Japan as its members.

Groups which did not take part in *Nitten* were formed by calligraphers in the '*Dai Nippon Shodo In*', whose role was taken over in 1948 by the Mainichi Calligraphy Exhibition. It has been within these groups that the question of the art of calligraphy has been most systematically explored and the avant-garde movement found a voice.

In 1940 Hidai Tenrai's pupil Ueda Sokyū (1896–1963) established the '*Keiseikai*', an avant-garde calligraphy group. At that time members included Morita Shiryu, Uno Sesson, Inoue Yu-ichi and Eguchi Sougen. The group is still active, continuing to implement the ideas of Hidai Tenrai's '*Shodo Geijutsu Sha*'. Kawabe Seika (see illustration) is on the current permanent executive. The group exhibits annually as well as participating in the Mainichi Calligraphy Exhibition.

Morita Shiryu left the 'Keiseikai' in 1952 to found the 'Bokujinkai' with Inoue Yu-ichi and Eguchi Sougen.

Their main emphasis was on individual study and expression and so they refused to participate in large exhibitions or organizations. In 1951, Morita began publishing the magazine 'Boku Bi' privately.

It continued for thirty years and became internationally famous for introducing calligraphy to the West.

The first public exposition of calligraphy as an art of line rather than faithful reproduction of script was just before the Second World War when the 'Keiseikai' exhibited abstract work not based on characters in an exhibition on the Ginza in Tokyo. Another early shock to the mainstream calligraphic world was the piece 'Den no Variation' (1945) by Hidai Nankoku, Hidai Tenrai's son. The main criticism of the abstract work was that it was not calligraphy but painting. The calligraphers responded by saying that there was no doubt they were calligraphers, that they might also be painters but prior to either they were human beings. Their point was that the labelling of the art was not as important as the expression of their inner self through the line. As Hidai Nankoku said, they are 'works which show the heart in the line': "*shin sen sakuhin*".

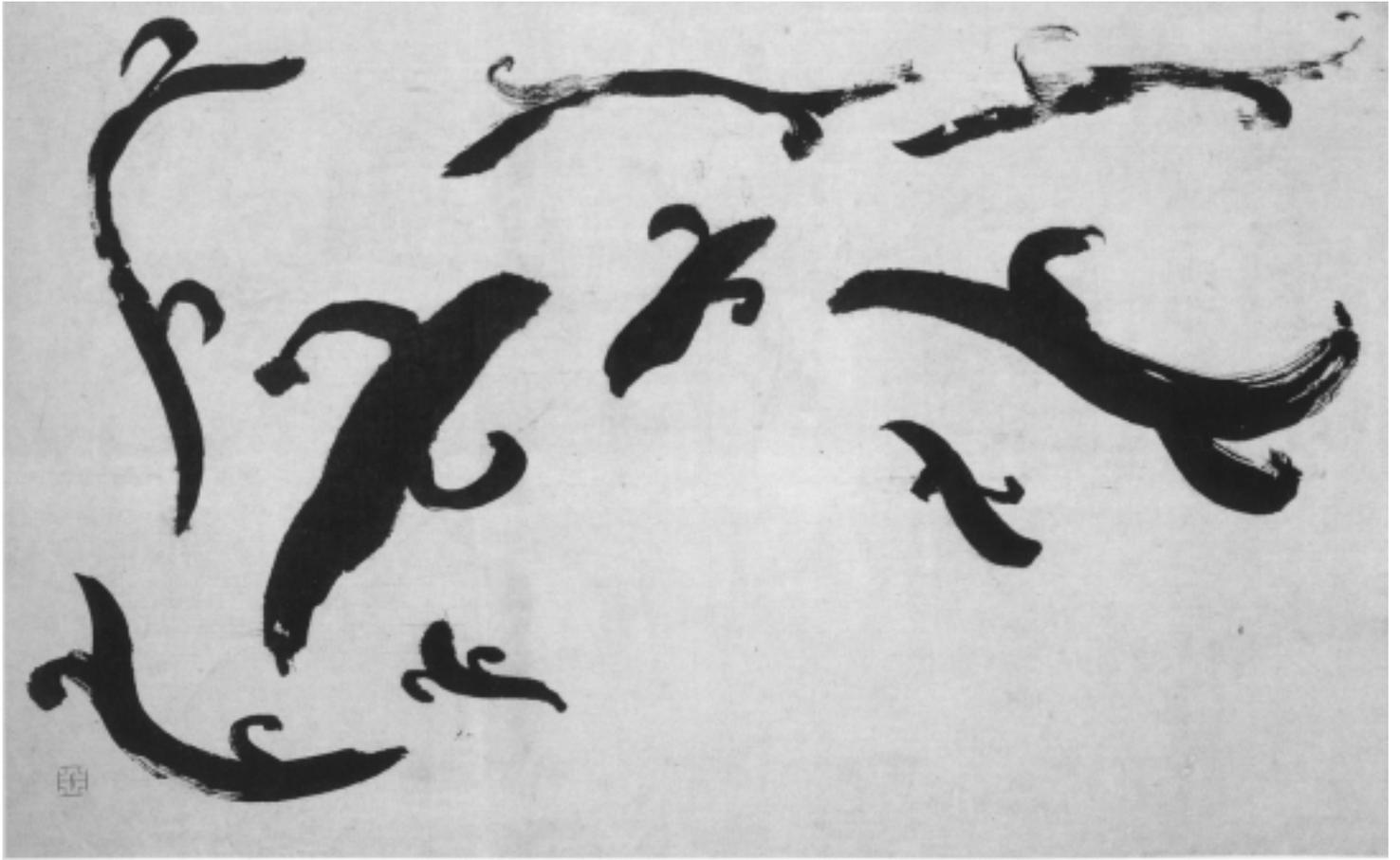
An incident of central importance to the avant-garde movement both because it initiated the official recognition of their art by the Mainichi Calligraphy Exhibition organisers as well as clearly demonstrating their philosophical position, was the decision by Ueda Sokyū to leave *Nitten* in 1951.

He and Uno Sesson had been exhibiting with *Nitten* since 1948. However, the piece Ueda submitted in 1951 was rejected. Its title, 'Ai' means love. The character *ai* is 愛. Ueda's work was not based on this character and was written as an abstract piece. (It was in fact inspired by the sight of his grandson learning to crawl). However, the work presents a problem as it is a perfect rendering of the character *shina*, 品, meaning goods. It was rejected on the grounds that as it looked like *shina* it should be called 'Shina'. Ueda countered by saying that the fact that it happened to look like *shina* did not affect his desire to name the piece 'Ai'. For him the title 'Ai' was appropriate and other connotations irrelevant. Uno Sesson followed Ueda Sokyū out of *Nitten* the next year.

Another problem piece for *Nitten* was 'Black Mountain, Black Valley' by Ozawa Gakyū. This piece was first submitted in 1953 but strongly rejected on the grounds that it was not in the *Nitten* style.

In response to this situation the Mainichi Calligraphy Exhibition formed a new section, 'New Trends in Calligraphy' or '*Shin Keiko no Sho*' in 1951. The name was subsequently changed to 'Images in Ink Art', '*Bokushou Bijutsu*' in 1954. This was further revised to 'Avant-garde Work', '*Zenei Sakuhin*', and finally to 'Avant-garde Calligraphy', '*Zenei Sho*', which is its name today. The latter revision is important as it indicates the calligraphers' understanding of the meaning of calligraphy. Abstract work is to be included in a definition of calligraphy, not just as an activity alongside.

The two other modern calligraphy sections in the Mainichi Calligraphy Exhibition are 'Modern Poems and Writings' '*Kindai Shibun*' and 'One Character Calligraphy', '*Ichi Ji Sho*'. Both the leaders of these move-



HIDAI NANKOKU 'Variation on Lightning' ('Den no Variation') 1945

ments, Kaneko Outei (the former) and Tejima Yukei (the latter) were followers of Hidai Tenrai but they diverged from the avant-garde movement as led by Ueda Sokyū. Ueda epitomises the extreme of Hidai's philosophy, Kaneko and Tejima are more moderate.

Avant-garde calligraphy is, then, abstract work produced in the same way as a piece of calligraphy. It has a definite stroke order, a similar performance-style of execution and is often based on a character. The character is almost always so distorted that it is not possible to discern what it is. The title of the piece is often the character from which it is derived but not always. Another related art, *bokushō*, images in ink, is a freer expression. The piece is not usually based on a character, but is written in the same way as a piece of calligraphy. The title is usually freely chosen. Since the 1960s *bokushō* has developed beyond the calligraphic limits and now encompasses more pictorial work by artists and not just calligraphers. A variety of techniques may be used and there may be no definite stroke order. Calligraphers have used some of these techniques but always write the main form of the piece in a calligraphic way with a designated stroke order.

Avant-garde calligraphy is calligraphy by virtue of its methodology and style of production and by the definition of calligraphy as an art of line. What then are the special characteristics of the calligraphic line? The calligraphic line, as defined by the avant-garde is based on the calligraphic theory of Lady Wei (*Eifujin* in Japanese), the fourth-century Chinese calligrapher, scholar and teacher of Wang Hsi-chi (*Ogishi* in Japanese), (?307–?365 AD) and arguably the most illustrious calligrapher in the history of Chinese calligraphy. She wrote:

‘The writing of one who has strength of brush is “bony” and the writing of one who is weak in brush is “fleshy”. Writing that is bony with little flesh is called “muscular”; writing that is fleshy with little bone is “ink hog”. Writing that has much strength and is rich in muscle is sacred; writing without strength or muscle is sickly. Each is used according to the situation.’

The calligraphic line should be like a human limb and have bone, muscle, flesh and skin. In other words it should be sculptural or ‘three dimensional’. This means a line which does not just run over the surface of the paper as a superficial design but a line which is deep and which in a sense moves through the white of the paper, interacting with it. A flat ‘two dimensional’ line does not do either. A deep line is a strong, fully energised line which vitalises the white. The more vital the line the more the white is energised.

In order to produce such a line the calligrapher must write from start to finish with no touching up or stopping for rests. It is, in effect, a performance. The calligrapher is forced to focus his expression in order to produce a work which flows gracefully without hesitation from stroke to stroke. Hesitation hints at both calculation, which undermines the sense of naturalness central to its appreciation, and it blocks the flow of energy through the piece. The Chinese master, Wang Hsi-chih wrote: ‘Write with

the idea existing before the brush! This ensures the integrity and overall structure of the piece. It also necessitates thorough practice.

Morita Shiryu places the performance of a piece at the centre of his definition of calligraphy. The piece must be written with 'one piercing movement', *ikken shite ikkan kiri*. He postulates that by so doing the calligrapher is able to pierce through himself by virtue of the life energy released in the act of writing. He can break through the boundaries of his subjectivity and reach that life energy. This is simultaneously manifested in his calligraphy.

Ueda Sokyū and the Keiseikai group emphasise the expression of the emotions. Calligraphy is an emotional expression of the self at the moment of writing. It is not self-consciously forced. According to Ueda, it is more embarrassing for a calligrapher to lack heart than technique. Calligraphy communicates through the feelings expressed in the work. The spectator, as a human being, shares the same human values and emotions as the calligrapher and responds to the emotional impact of the work.

As such, these calligraphers were not so concerned about whether their renderings of poems or characters were appropriate, whether the characters were legible or whether they had used a character at all. The calligrapher may have a reason for choosing a particular character or poem to write but he does not necessarily set out to represent its meaning through its layout or design on the page or its interpretation. The character *sei*, 静, peaceful, for example can be written very violently. Too much intellectualization is seen to interfere with the process of writing, preventing fluency and grace of line required.

For the calligrapher, the process of producing work is an existential involvement. After the initial spark of inspiration, it is a journey inwards: a confrontation between the calligrapher and the form. The form gradually becomes 'his' during the writing and re-writing of the drafts when the initial or generally accepted meaning of the character may be forgotten. Morita Shiryu suggests the calligrapher penetrates to a deeper level of understanding and that the character is understood in a different, more profound way from usual, one that is intensely personal but which belongs to the true life-force, not the world of everyday meaning. In Zen terms, the form becomes the calligrapher's *koan*. He resolves the tensions the forms creates within on his own.

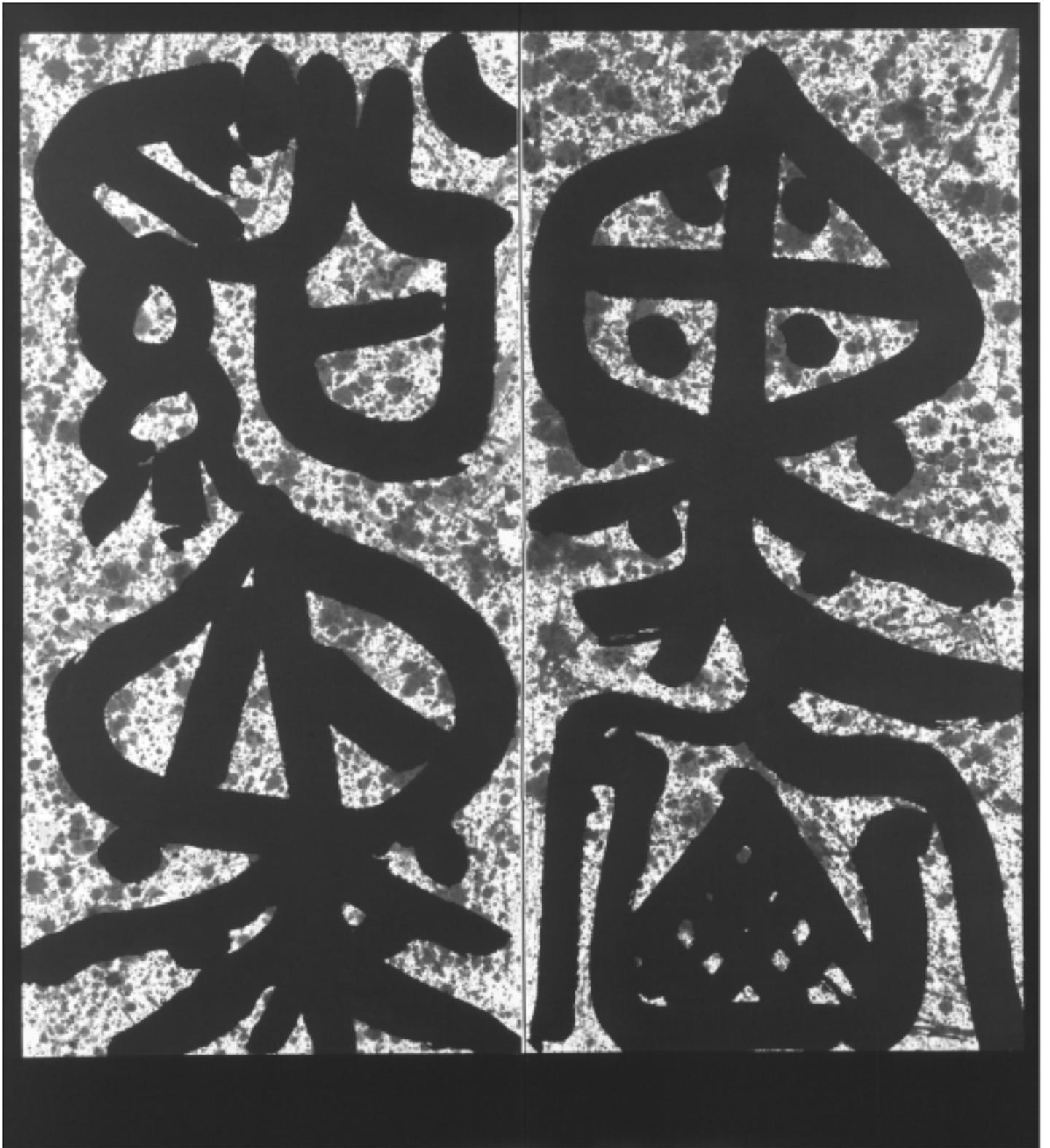
The execution of the piece demands a total absorption, both physical and mental, a complete giving of the self to the writing. When the calligrapher 'surfaces', lets go of the piece and stands back, he sees the character both as his own and also as a character the same as any other with no special association. But implicit in the piece is the whole experience the calligrapher goes through from initial spark, through confused wrestling with line and form, to the absolute commitment of execution.

With these as the avant-garde calligraphers' main concerns it is not surprising that they take a dim view of those more conservative critics who say their work is not calligraphy because it is not legible. Their



(above) UEDA SOKYU 'Ai' 1951 (Reproduced with permission of the artist's family)

(opposite) OSAWA GAKYU 'Black Mountain, Black Valley' ('Koku Gaku Koku Gei') 1953
(Reproduced with permission of the Gunma Prefectural Contemporary Art Museum)



main response to this accusation is based on the fact that illegible calligraphy can be and is enjoyed. They argued that legibility has always been a problem for cursive scripts, but their formal beauty has still been appreciated. Legibility as such is only a problem when content as much as form is important. If the piece is not written to give information, it does not matter if it cannot be read. In fact, it was in response to the demand for a clearer script to be used on monuments in the early Han period that the Scribe's script developed. Further evidence that calligraphy could be appreciated for its form rather than its meaning came from the positive reactions of foreigners to the art when it was exhibited in the West. In 1955 modern calligraphy toured the United States for the first time in the 'Modern Japanese and Sumi Art Exhibition', and the *Keiseikai* exhibited in New York.

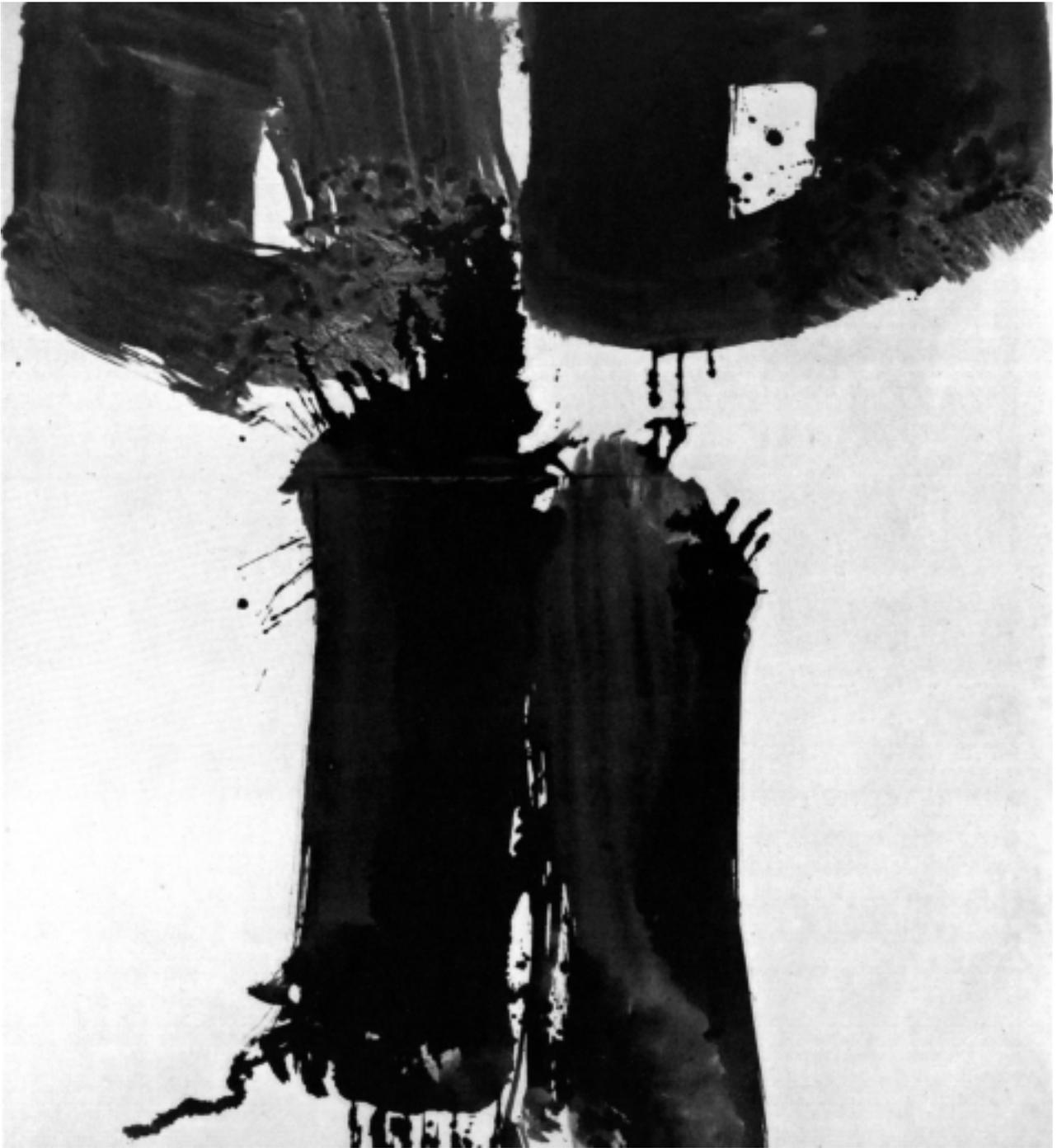
A significant influence on the Japanese calligraphers was the development of abstract art in the West, especially the Abstract Expressionists in the United States and the Art Informel movement in Europe. Parallels were drawn with calligraphy, the emphasis of both art forms was on energetic brush work and a performance style of execution. Avant-garde calligraphers took part in the 'Japanese and American Abstract Art Exhibition' in 1955 in the National Modern Art Museum in Tokyo. They participated in the Sao Paulo Biennale Exhibitions from 1956. Modern calligraphy was also exhibited in Baden Baden, Germany, in 1963 alongside work by Picasso and Miro.

However, despite the superficial resemblance to Western abstract art, calligraphers realised the abstract within the Western artistic tradition is not the same as the abstract within the calligraphic tradition. Morita Shiryu, in discussions with the artist H.O. Gotz argued that the Western artist is in an entirely different position to that of the calligrapher. The artist's relationship to his artistic tradition is much looser than the calligrapher's to the calligraphic. The artist can if he wants, reject or ignore the history of his art. The calligrapher cannot. He is working and practising within a centuries-old tradition of the written language of China and Japan.

In comparison to the wealth of the many thousands of Chinese characters passed from one generation of calligraphers to the next, accumulating new variations on the way, geometrical forms or the alphabet are meagre fare. Tejima Yukei, a follower of Hidai Tenrai, but not of the avant-garde school, is not alone when he says that it is a waste to choose to work with circles, squares and triangles when there is the opportunity to work with the characters. Uno Sesson has produced work using the alphabet, but commented that the alphabet is far simpler formally than the characters and limited in potential.

It is from within this framework that the calligrapher produces an abstract piece. The calligrapher draws his aesthetic from calligraphy, he uses a calligraphic methodology and the line is a calligraphic 'three dimensional' line. The calligrapher may not enjoy the freedom of that of the western abstract artist but the calligraphic tradition more than compensates in terms of resource and stimulation.

A factor which is more damaging to the individual calligrapher's creativity is the training methods and



KAWABE SEIKA 'Negahi' 1968 Mainichi Grand Prize. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

hierarchical calligraphy school system. This has limited the work of second and third generation avant-garde calligraphers. Work is in the style of the school to which they belong. It is ironic that many of the ideas of free expression which the leaders of these groups espouse are not actually reflected in the work of the pupils. It may be that the calligraphers themselves, both the leaders and pupils find it hard to shake off the traditional attitude to artwork as an example of a school style rather than as an expression of an individual artist. The schools themselves are obliged to produce work for the large exhibitions in the style of those exhibitions. This includes the 'Mainichi Calligraphy Exhibition' whose modern calligraphy sections have styles firmly rooted in the 1950s.

Hidai Tenrai's approach to calligraphy, on the one hand as a study of the classics and on the other as an expression of the self through the *hitsu i* provoked new directions in calligraphy. The avant-garde movement represents the extreme interpretation of these ideas. The calligraphers' study of the classics is thorough and the use made of the different calligraphic forms and lines is the most daring and radical of the modern movements. The abstract work produced is an abstract within the calligraphic tradition ; it is this tradition which provides the grounding for their vitally expressive lines and the organisation of the calligraphic world which controls it.

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FURTHER READING

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